

**THEMATIC PREOCCUPATION AND HERMENEUTICS OF
SELECTED SONGS/MUSIC OF PAUL ODI: A 21ST CENTURY
APPROACH**

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Abstract

It is no longer an aberration to say that songs in traditional African cultures continue to suffer a setback possibly as a result of inadequate attention given to songs and music in traditional African societies. Many African scholars and practitioners often gloss over traditional African songs/music conceivably as a result of their religious affiliation. This paper therefore provides a perspective on which socio-cultural music and songs of Paul Odi can be perceived artistically towards cultural education in Nigeria. Against this background, this paper adopts interviews and content analysis for its research methodology. The findings reveal that, songs in traditional African societies are yet to assume their proper place in contemporary socio-milieu. In view of this, some selected songs of Paul Odi of Igala North Central Nigeria will be x-rayed to situate him among other oral poets whose songs serves as agent of social control among other things. The paper therefore concludes that, there is a need for increased social awareness and patronage towards proper artistic appreciation of traditional music/songs in a globalised world.

Introduction

It is evident within the contemporary African cultural milieus that most of the African youths in the 21st century inadvertently ignore to pick interest in listening to contents and messages from traditional African songs/music

despite its contribution and relevance towards national development. The reason(s) for this may not be far to fetch. This is in view of the fact that, in contemporary epoch, traditional songs/music is often not set apart from its social and cultural context. In a similar vein, at the mentioning of traditional songs/music, most African youths out rightly perceive it as something that shouldn't be mentioned on the tabloid of African entertainment in this modern time. Majority of the African youth often consider traditional songs/music as 'primitive' and 'archaic.' Some argue that their interests in listening to traditional music are persistently marred as a result of its language and lack of modern instrumentations and ideology. This perhaps seems to be one of the reasons Mariam Iye and Godwin Onuche agreed that there is conceptual confusion and misinterpretation about traditional medium of communication. In their opinion, at the mentioning of the term 'Traditional' the general view or notion indicates that traditional songs/music is something out-dated or primitive (128). Extrapolating from this view, it is disheartening to note that right from the outset; traditional songs from Igala land have suffered a tremendous setback. This is in view of the fact that traditional songs in African society are yet to assume both national and international colouration. To buttress this point, Baba Ojonugwa opined that, each time Igala music is played, some Igala sons and daughters 'frown' and 'makeface' (iv). It may be agreed as an established fact that oral poets are entertainers and subsequently agent of social control.

Paul Odi of Igala North Central Nigeria is one major Igala traditional poet whose songs continue to be relevant in contemporary Nigeria society till today. The lyrics and thematic preoccupation of his songs if properly interpreted and applied can contribute to attitudinal change towards making the society better. Paul Odi poetically uses his songs to address political issues vis-a-vis people's plight and the socio-cultural conditions of the African people. He was often prophetic in his songs. For example, in his collection of songs titled *Eli gba mi kedo* which was sang around 1980s, when Buhari became the military Head of State, Paul Odi vehemently condemned corrupt practices via his songs. He categorically appraised Muhamodu Buhari as his government has a zero tolerance for corruption. He equally enunciated the fact that if one indulges in corrupt practices especially in Buhari's government, there is every tendency that, he or she may end up in jail. Many at that time thought it was a mere song sung by Paul Odi in his traditional dialect that may not have national interpretation or international colouration in terms of its contents and

instrumentation, but lo and behold, in this contemporary epoch especially in the 21st century, president Buhari is currently a Nigerian civilian Head of State still maintaining zero tolerance for corruption. People are often cautious in indulging in sharp practices. Peradventure one is caught in the act; the fellow may face the full wrath of the law. It is in view of this known fact among others that this research is out to investigate how relevant Odi's songs are in terms of its hermeneutics, cultural exchange and its socio-political preoccupation using a 21st century approach in cautioning nefarious attitudes of the masses towards a better society.

Igala people and their Origin

It is imperative in the course of this research to be acquainted with the Igala people and their society. The paper paradoxically dwells on the traditional songs and music of Paul Odi, a singer of Igala origin. Historically, Tom Miachi opined that, a history of the Igala on its own and in the context of the history of Nigeria is yet to be written (74). Tom Miachi citing Boston enunciates that,

Whatever is known of the historical background of this people (Igala) who has exerted so much influence in the political, cultural, and economic life of the peoples of the Niger and Benue valleys has come mostly from oral traditions rather than from archaeological or written evidence (75).

The above assertion underscores one of the reasons we delve into socio political organisation of the Igala ethno-nationality in terms of their traditional songs and music. For instance, different versions abound historically in terms of Igala Origin. First, there is this perception and believe that, the Igala people migrated from (amidst) the Yoruba ethnic group. Another is this perception that considers Igala to have come from the Jukun, while the third account holds that, Igala particularly the ruling class come from the Benin. Be that as it may however, as Brain Dawtrey rightly posits, the most definite historical statement that can be made about the Igala is that, they had a common origin with Yoruba and that the separation took place long ago to allow their considerable linguistic differences (21). This claim by Dawtrey is evidently buttressed by the facts that, about (40%) of the names of things are similar and the songs and musical affinities that exist between the two languages are glaring.

In a similar way, one of the most populous oral history common amongst the Igala is that which says that, Igala came from Benin. This account became very prominent and acceptable by some persons owing to the fact

that there is *Eju beju-ailo* (the wooden mask which is always worn over the neck of Attah as a symbol of authority and lordship). Dawtrey contends in a report that the origin of Igala Kingship was not Jukun but Benin. Brain Dawtrey further asserts that, beyond a certain geographical plausibility, we can point to the fact that the famous brass mask by the act is most probably of Benin workmanship, that the wearing of bead on the wrists as a symbol of chieftaincy is common to Benin and Igala (23). In the midst of all these perceptions of the origin of the Igala people, the position of Miachi holds sway; there is still no cogent consensus about the origin of the Igala people.

Theoretical Framework

This research leans on Oral-formulaic theory developed principally by Milman Parry in the 1920s to explain how Homeric epics could have been passed down through many generations purely through words of mouth, and why formulas appeared in it in the way they did. It is evident that the locus classicus for Oral Formulaic-theory was established by the work of Parry and his student, Albert Lord on the Serbian oral epic poetry of what was at that time part of Yugoslavia, where oral formulaic composition could be observed and recorded ethnographically. The Wikipedia, free encyclopaedia (on line) reiterates that the theory of oral formulaic composition seeks to explain two related issues: one, the mechanism whereby some oral poets are bound to improvise poetry and two; why orally improvised poetry has the characteristic it does. According to this theory, poets have a store of formulas (a formula being an expression which is regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express a particular essential idea) and that by linking these in conventionalised ways, they can rapidly compose verse. Paul Odi's oral formula is *Angale*. Using this formula, Odi explores the social problems of his society. His repertoire in oratory covers a wide array of socio-economic and political issues even though he is not involved in partisan politics. He brings this formula to bear in all of these spheres depending on the nature of the performance. Odi as Igala oral poet often calls for peace, unity, and love among African people through his songs.

Odi's Philosophy and the Thematic Relevance of his songs

To begin with, it is imperative to note that the concept of Music in Igala land is quite different from the European concept. That is why Phrases like *Iya* (play), *Eli* (song) are at various times used to refer to music making, music performance or the art of music in Igala land. Unlike the

contemporary political sycophant who often picks delight in praise singing, Odi's traditional songs continue to remain as a social conscience of his community and African people as a whole. One major significant fact about Odi is the dexterity with which he often uses his songs to report and comment on current affairs and politics in Nigeria. He also believed in using his songs to reflect and subsequently mould public opinion (oral interview). Corroborating this view, Baba Ojonugwa opined that,

The norms and values of the traditional Igala Society are handed down from one generation to the other by oral means; music being a dynamic medium is used to pass this down and to subsequently enforce these values. Some Igala lyrics advice people on how to live, walk, relate and to follow socially accepted norms of the land (25).

Deducing from the above assertion, one could notice that the relevance of Odi's song is often timeless and corrective in nature. His songs are often epigrammatic and metaphorical in its efforts to correct societal ill. Odi once used his songs titled *Eli gba mi kedo* (Song Embraced me) to examine Buhari's Political power in the 1980s when he condemned greed, corruption, exploitation and poverty in the midst of abundant natural resources in Nigeria.

Juxtaposing the dexterity of Odi and Uko Akpan of Ekere of Akwa Ibom State for instance, one may contend that Odi and Uko Akpan shared a similar vision in their music career and proficiency. This may underscore why Uwemedimo Iwokedok appraising the philosophy and oral poetic skill of Uko Akpan reiterates thus:

There is hardly any of his compositions that does not have idea of unity, harmony, and peace expressed either implicitly or explicitly... his years of commitment to the art, affirm his philosophy that folksongs should not just amuse or entertain but should arouse the consciousness of the audience towards positive change for a better society. In other words, he perceives folksongs or 'sung poetry' as a formidable instrument for achieving socio-political and cultural equilibrium (23).

Comparing the above assertion on Uko Akpan with Paul Odi, one may not be out of place to say that Uko Akpan and Paul Odi shared in the same ideology. Baba stressed further that, Music is the greatest weapon of mass mobilisation on earth (26). Commenting on Paul Odi's song, Baba enunciates that, Paul Odi the *Angale* expert in one of his songs described incest as taboo when he sang thus: *Igbo ki nw'ulo abia, ifuje*: Meaning that, Igbo man admired the dog and ate its meat. Again he sang that *Obuko*

ki nw'ulo iye nwu ifu' hi. This means that, the He-goat admired his mother and made love to her. In view of the fact that in Igala cosmology, committing incest is often considered as a social taboo and societal crime, perpetrators of this crime are often punish, humiliated and disgraced. Odi's songs and music continue to remain a potent tool for social control among the Igala North-Central Nigeria.

Didactic and Hermeneutic Survey of Odi's Songs

It is evident that Igala people have influenced a large number of other ethnic nationalities over the years with their culture and Kinship tastes. Songs and music are vital and very significant to the average Igala person. They are fluid with music. According to Festus Ainoko,

Igala songs, like many others, are usually developed through compositions. Some are situational; others are didactic, while many are exclusively meant for rites, solemn festivals, and social events. Some talented individuals with exceptional music and song prowess take to singing as profession, specializing in the various branches of Igala music (viii).

Traditional Songs among the Igala are often noticed in various branches such as *Angale, Agwom, Ogba, Ibele, Alo, Abele, Idologo, Iya Ogwu, Igba, Oye, Anukikpo*, and *Olele*. These songs are so important due to the moral lessons from those Songs. Within the Igala cultural milieu, songs are often used to sensationalise messages, relieve tension, re-vitalise depleting strength especially on the farm or while doing vigorous exercise. Most Igala musicians generate discussions on contemporary issues and events. They run commentaries on any topical development and takes position unequivocally. For instance, Ainoko avers that, in 1984 when Buhari struck and dispatched President Shagari and his regime to terminate the Second Republic, Paul Odi released an album to support the intervention of military in the politics of Nigeria (22). The song was occasioned by the insensitivity of the NPN government headed by Alhaji Shehu Shagari and his cohort who abused power excessively. They allegedly used their positions in office to invade public treasury and flaunted the looted wealth with impunity. Contracts were awarded arbitrarily to party loyalists who normally collect mobilisation fees and abandoned the projects. Non payment of staff salaries, political victimisation, partisanship, etc became the trade mark of NPN government at all levels throughout the federation. In view of this scenario, Paul Odi in his song taunted the corrupt tendencies of the ousted civilian government through the use of metaphor.

He pictured Buhari as an enraged lion on the rampage in the forest that roared and sent gazelles and antelopes to flight. He sang thus:

Buhari eni ame ya-a-a-a-a!
Alapa arule, Ogoli arule

This means that,

“Buhari echoes a fierce Shout
And the stag and deer scamper...”

Also, in another track of the same album dedicated to Buhari’s Coup against Shagari, Odi taunted the sudden slide in the fortunes of the former public office holders in the ousted regime who were playing God previously. He passed across the message that the evanescent comforts of an office are neither worth relying on, nor corruption worth taken for a lifestyle. He sang thus:

Ama kuma anmo omi ago ojole
Ama jomo anmo omi Ukode yi
Todu okowa kuma gbaje...
Buhari Ona

The above lyrics means, the men who previously were feasting with glass cups

Now feast and drink with spoons
Because of our money they embezzled...
Buhari, you are a man.

It is evident that most of Odi’s songs are commentaries on social events and issues. For instance, Odi frown at desecration of cultural practices in the land. It was once said that, *Ekwe*, one of the most revered, sacred and dreaded incarnate being of Attah Igala had started gracing *Ogba*, an exclusively entertainment dance gathering. In an interview with my correspondent, it was said that *Ekwe*’s outing should only be for sacred occasions and very important function of Attah. *Ekwe* is not a dance incarnate being among the Attah incarnate beings. Apart from *Ekwe*’s ritual and spiritual relevance, its glamorous costume, shape, and gait in fashion of a hedgehog do not permit *Ekwe* to dance. Commenting on the relevance of *Ekwe* incarnate being Tom Miachi in an interview with Chief Ebiloma Anekwu supported by Achimugu Ochala avers that, *Ojima duu k’Ata ne, Ekwe nwo ne ge*. Meaning, “All the respect, honour of glory that the Ata has, are also given to Ekwe.”(282). Because of the spiritual importance of Igala Kingship, it is dangerous treating certain traditions which form the basis of the kingdom’s foundation with spite. Bearing this

in mind, Odi came out offensively in a track, titled; *Chenwu K'Ayegba ji...* to denounce such sacrilege and reminded those involved of what it took Ayegba Omaidoko to establish and preserve Igala Kingdom. Within a unique force of poetic skill, Odi lamented the desecration of the kingship's ritual order with the following lyrics:

Chewnu K'Ayegba ji onwu me tu yi nile!

O! ile na go yio! Ile!

Enwu me bie le, ile!

Odi, again asks rhetorically:

Meaning:

Are you not untying what Ayegba Knotted?

O men!

I am only making supplication!

O men!

You are indeed desecrating the land!

O men

In a similar instance, Ata Ayegba Om'Idoko was the most popular king Igala people ever had. According to Ainoko, Ayegba ascended the throne around 500 AD (28). He tried his best possible to expand the territory of Igala Kingdom and had even the Igbos as his vassal subjects. Ayegba is perceived as one of the classical Igala patriot who used five of his children for sacrificial passages to ensure the preservation of his Kingdom. It is believed that he introduced many rites and observances in the palace with well laid out rules as a central force of the principles for preserving the throne of Igala Kingship. He instituted the nine ceremonial Ata incarnate beings and two sacred others called *Adugbe* and *Ekwe* for critical ritual and sacred festivals. These orders have been observed by all Atas who succeeded Ayegba until that attempt to abuse it. Odi saw no need for such abuse in view of the price paid to institute it and the grave danger that follows the abuse. He used his song's lyrics to document thus:

Ayegba Om'Idoko ibioma melu, ile;

Inikpi ma mudu gwaji udeju'deju, ile

Onojaliga mamudu gwaji udeju'deju, ile

Ogado, mamudu gwaji udeju'deju, ile

Omaodoko mamudu gwaji Udeju'deju, ile

Onojaligbe mamudu gwaji Udeju'deju, ile.

Odi in the above musical lyrics listed five children Ata Ayegba had to bury alive at each threat to the foundation of his kingdom. The above lyrics can be interpreted thus:

*Ayegba Om 'Idoko had five children, O men
Inikpi the princess was buried alive, O men
Princess Onojoaliga was buried alive, O men
Princess Ogado was buried alive, Omen
Princess Omaodoko was buried alive, O men
Princess Onojaligbe was buried alive O men.*

Recommendations

It is disheartening how some scholars and elite who ought to be promoting Nigeria's cultural heritage now frown at the carnivals and festivals which are essentially marked by traditional music, dance, and acrobatic display in the 21st century. Some of these scholars considered music and dance and traditional songs as a mere cultural jamboree considering the huge amount of money that are usually spent in the organisation of such event, therefore, it should be deemphasised. In view of this obnoxious scenario, culture managers, that is, the ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation and their parastatals must be alive to their responsibility in the promotion and sensitization of traditional songs and music towards encouraging national integration. Researchers should do more on traditional songs and music which are didactic in nature especially in this 21st century that most activities are often coloured by the western ways of life. There is urgent need to shift attention from where we are at the moment, to identifying and carefully adapting nationally-beneficial moral lessons from African traditional songs and music. The need to discourage pervasive forces of modernity on Nigeria's cultural songs and heritages become sacrosanct in the 21st century.

Conclusion

It has been observed from the foregoing that civilisation and modernity tend to pose threat to the cultural values of the Igala especially as it relates to their traditional songs and music. Rev. Father Fedelis Egbunu opined that, to give regard and respect to the cultural values does not connote primitivity, backwardness, brute-likeness, irrationality, non-sophistication or belongingness to the indigenous religious sphere (8). It therefore means that cultural values as evident in Odi's traditional music and songs in its lyrics and nuances denote positive elements of Igala culture and should be regarded as part of the common inheritance of a social group among the Igala north- central Nigeria.

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